

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Mitsuru Yamada

The oldest child of Japanese immigrants Mume and Masakichi Yamada, Mitsuru Yamada was born on June 5, 1907, in Volcano on the Big Island. He grew up in Hilo where he attended Waiākea Kai School and Japanese-language school.

After graduating, Yamada worked as a garage mechanic, but after only a month, he gave that up and became a fisherman working with his father. Soon after, he was hired as a cook on an *aku* boat, working his way up to first-class fisherman. By December 7, 1941, he had become skipper and part-owner of another *aku* boat.

Strict fishing regulations during the war period prevented Mitsuru and his crew from doing their work. Instead of fishing, Yamada found himself working for the army and classified as "unskilled labor," making camouflage nets and loading and unloading lumber.

Yamada returned to *aku* fishing once the bans were lifted, and continued until his retirement in 1968. He lives in Hilo with his wife, Fumiyo Yamada.

Tape Nos. 22-82-1-93 and 22-83-1-93

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Mitsuru Yamada (MY)

May 11, 1993

Hilo, Hawai'i

BY: Jonylle Sato (JS)

[Editor's note: Also present at the interview is MY's wife, Fumiyo Yamada (FY).]

JS: This is an interview with Mr. Mitsuru Yamada in Hilo, Hawai'i, at his home. Today is May 11, 1993, and the interviewer is Jonylle Sato.

Okay, Mr. Yamada, let's start with the date you were born.

MY: I was born at Volcano House, [Hawai'i], 1907.

JS: What day was that?

MY: June 5th.

JS: Okay, and who were your parents?

MY: My father was Masakichi Yamada, and my mother was Mume Yamada.

JS: And where were they from?

MY: They were born in Japan.

JS: In what part of Japan?

MY: Yamaguchi-*ken*. Iwakuni[-*shi*], Imazu-*mura*.

JS: And what did your father do in Japan?

MY: My father side, I do not know. Japan side I do not know. My mother side too, no, I do not know.

FY: Oh, you do not know what they were doing?

MY: In Japan, I don't know what they were doing.

JS: So in Hawai'i then, what kind of job did your father do?

MY: Oh, my father was---do you want from the beginning or. . . .

JS: Yeah.

MY: He came as a laborer for I think was Pepe'ekeo sugar mill [Pepe'ekeo Sugar Company]. Then I heard that he (got) sick. And then after that I think his contract expired and then he start working down at 'Ōla'a 22 Mile [Camp]. You know those olden days, they used to have (a) machine they used to call donkey [engine]. They had the steam engine and then they string wire and knock the tree down. And then they make lumber out of that. Might be 'ōhi'a tree, might be koa.

Then I do not know very well what he was doing at 'Ōla'a, but after that we move to Puna. And that time I was small, only about three or four [years old], and he was foreman at that time. He was knocking (down) 'ōhi'a tree for making tie, you know the railroad tie, that's what he was doing. That's what his job was. Then I don't know how long (he did that), because at that time (I was) only about four or five [years old]. But after that, when (the) contract *wen* expire he moved down to Kona side and he was foreman, too, at that time, and he was knocking down koa tree. I don't know what they (were) making, furniture or what, I do not know.

We stayed there for a while, then my father (thought) that he had enough money. I don't know how much he had, but he said he's going (to) Japan. So we took the boat and we (left) Kona and went to Honolulu. And we stayed at Komeya Hotel. Then, I don't know how long we stayed there, might be two, three months waiting for the boat to come in and then go to Japan. But I don't know, he changed his mind, he came down to Hilo. Then we stayed at the hotel, then he just played there for one year straight. Then he figure that he want to be (a) fisherman. Then he bought the boat (and was a) fisherman until he died.

JS: So how old were you when you went to Honolulu?

MY: I do not know how old. Because when I went (to) school (in Hilo) I started from kindergarten, see, might be only about six or seven [years old]. I stayed in the hotel [in Hilo], then he [MY's father] moved after one year. He moved to a cottage, then he bought a boat, then start fishing. I went to school till (I was) only about fifteen, only about sixth grade. Then my father just said, "You man already, fifteen." They class me as a man. "You gotta go (to) work." Then I start working.

JS: Well, what about your mother? Did your parents marry in Japan?

MY: No. She was married on this island.

JS: So they met in Hawai'i?

MY: Yeah. I don't know when they got married, and I do not know where they did marry. But when he [MY's father] was living at Pepe'ekeo plantation, he was single. Then when he moved to 'Ōla'a side, I think that's when my mother came from Japan. My mother was born in Yamaguchi[-ken], too.

(Before) I start(ed) fishing, my father (told) me to (be) a mechanic. Then he sent me to Isa

Garage, (and) I stayed there for one month.

JS: I want to talk little bit more about your parents. Your younger days first.

MY: When I was small I do not know too much about my parents (chuckles).

JS: Do you know why your mother came (to Hawai'i)?

MY: I do not know (if she was a) picture bride or my father knew my mother because they were living same place [in Yamaguchi-ken].

JS: What did she do when she married your father? Did she work?

MY: Oh, she (was) just a housewife. But when she was young, when my father was foreman, then my mother used to cook for them, [the other single workers]. That's about all. She doesn't work after that.

JS: Did they live in plantation house or their own house?

MY: I think the company furnish their house.

JS: Did she do gardening?

MY: I don't think so. Might be only family gardens, small part like that.

JS: And do you have brothers or sisters?

MY: Oh, yeah. I have four brothers and one sister.

JS: And you're number?

MY: One. And my brothers and sister, they all living.

JS: And when your dad was planning to go back to Japan, was only you or. . . .

MY: Me and one more brother. Only two of us (and my parents).

JS: And then you folks came back to Hilo, yeah?

MY: Yeah.

JS: And that's when you started school?

MY: Yeah. I had started school when I came back to Hilo.

JS: And what school did you go to?

MY: Oh, Waiākea Kai [School].

- JS: What do you remember about school? What kind of things did you learn in school?
- MY: Oh, regular school, they teaching reading, writing, geography, like that.
- JS: And who were some of the other people that you went to school with? Were they mostly Japanese?
- MY: No, all mix. Might be Hawaiian, Japanese, Portuguese and all kind of mix.
- JS: And how did you folks get along?
- MY: With that classmate? Well, was okay, everything. We never have trouble.
- JS: What about the teachers? What kind of teachers were they?
- MY: Oh, the teacher, I don't know their true nationality. What I might say? American or . . .
- JS: White?
- MY: Yeah, all White. Only one I think, had Hawaiian mix. Oh, and one more Japanese. Mrs. [Mary] Saiki we used to call.
- JS: And did you play sports in school?
- MY: Oh no.
- JS: Just school?
- MY: No, no, that school (didn't have) any team to represent here and there at that time. Nobody. Although we play (on) our own, baseball among ourselves.
- FY: "Teacher strict," he said. Afternoon, before dark the teacher walk all around. And if get naughty (children), next day they come to school, the teacher (might) give (a lecture). Not like nowadays kind [of] teacher.
- MY: Oh, that is Japanese[-language school] teacher was going around.
- JS: So you went to Japanese[-language] school?
- MY: Yeah.
- FY: Oh, Japanese[-language] schoolteacher, then.
- MY: Yeah.
- FY: Not American teacher.
- MY: No, no.

JS: So tell me a little bit about Japanese[-language] school, then.

MY: Oh, Japanese school, only at the beginning when we went to school, well, that principal was strict. Every evening the teachers, they go all around the block, see what the children (are) doing evening time. And then one day my mother and my father, me and my brothers, we went to take a bath. Not like now, because olden days you go bathhouse then take a bath. Then at that time, I was small and my brothers (were) small, too. Then one day the teacher came down and saw me. When my mother and father, they go to the bathhouse, they leave the children to me. They put the children on my back and I supposed to carry (them) and then I going (to) take care. (That's) when my brother was small. The teacher saw me, and that Saturday the teacher said to the class, "As I was going around, I meet (a) certain guy on the street. He was taking care of the children. I like to see you fellows do the same thing." She praise me, but at that time I think nothing of it (laughs).

JS: So she would check on you folks even after school, then? This was after you came home from school she would walk around the block and check on everybody?

MY: No, the teacher used to go around evening time, say about five, six o'clock. She go around the block and check what the children doing.

JS: So why were you going to Japanese school?

MY: Oh, those days I go English[-language] school. . . . Not only me. The whole community go, see, the [Japanese] children. We go English school and after that we go Japanese school. Might be one hour, two hour.

JS: So did you speak Japanese with your parents?

MY: Yeah. My parents were Japanese. I gotta speak Japanese although you might say pidgin language or whatever, but. . . .

JS: So at home was all in Japanese you folks . . .

MY: Yeah, right.

JS: So only in English school you spoke English?

MY: Yeah.

JS: And what kind of things in Japanese school do you remember learning?

MY: Well, we read, we write. And then the teacher used to explain Japanese history. And arithmetic, too. Because before we used to have, you know, *soroban* they used to call that. We used to do that.

JS: Did you folks learn a lot about the Japanese emperor?

MY: Not too much, but they used to say about the emperor, when he had birthday, this and that. And then at that time, they used to celebrate the emperor's birthday. And then that day we

don't have [Japanese-language] school. Emperor's birthday like that.

JS: Did you like going to Japanese school?

MY: Well, not exactly I like. You cannot help (but) go (laughs).

JS: So most of the people in your neighborhood then, were they Japanese, too?

MY: Yeah. You might say every one of them.

JS: And this was when you were in your own house, yeah? Your father already bought a cottage, yeah? This wasn't plantation house, right?

MY: No, no, no. When we came over here, not plantation house. At the beginning we were staying at a rental house.

JS: So in your neighborhood then, your father was a fisherman, but what were some of the other people? What kind of job?

MY: Oh, majority of them is Japanese.

JS: So what kind of jobs did they do?

MY: The neighbors?

JS: Yeah.

MY: Well, when I was small I do not know, but when they [MY's family] move(d), we were staying by the hotel first, that time I do not know the neighbors too much. But when they move(d) to (a) different place, then certain neighbor I used to know. We used to stay among Japanese, see. Majority of them is Japanese and then that house owner was. . . . I forgot his name. Oh, they used to call, "Kanai." We used to stay Kanai Camp.

JS: So it was owned by Japanese?

MY: Yeah, owned by Japanese. We stayed for a while and then the lease expired on that place, then we gotta move. Then we made our own house. And we stayed different location, although Waiākea, but (only) the location different.

JS: When you were in Kanai Camp, do you remember . . .

(Tape inaudible.)

MY: I think the mister [Mr. Kanai] was sick and the lady take care. But I do not know very good.

JS: You were still young then?

MY: Yeah, I was small. I do not know very good.

JS: And your father was already a fisherman, right?

MY: Yeah.

JS: So, do you know why he decided to become a fisherman?

MY: Oh, at the beginning, see, he went out when he was playing. For one year, he used to go out fishing with his friends. And then he start to like that thing. Then he bought the boat and he came a fisherman. But like me, I went to become a mechanic. He send me only for one month. And then they paid only three dollar one month. Then my father say, "Oh, that is too little." He just take me out from that place, he tell me go fishing, then I went with him fishing. I went with him fishing, I think close to one year. Then some other fisherman, he tell my father to let me go with them fishing. I went with them as a cook boy. Then I (laughs) started fishing, too, as a *aku* boat fisherman.

JS: But when you . . .

MY: Then [I started] at the age of only about fifteen or sixteen I think, then I cook on that boat for seven years. At the beginning they paid me only half share. If one man he get ten dollar, well they only pay me five dollar. I don't know how long, but for a while I work as a cook. Half share. Then they put me up to three-quarter share (and) I work one year as a three-quarter share. Then they put me full-class fisherman, but still they put me as a cook. And I cook for seven years for them. Then from that they class me first-class fisherman.

(Telephone rings. Taping stops, then resumes.)

MY: Then as a first-class fisherman I stayed on the boat for another, I think one year or year-and-a-half. Then they start(ed) to plan to make another boat, but they never (asked) me to be one of them shareholder. They just leave me out. Well I (don't) care, well, they leave me out. In the meantime, my friend came from another boat. He tell me, "Eh, you quit that boat, come (to) our boat and run our boat [the *Suisan-maru*]." Well that's my chance.

So I tell 'em, "Eh, I going quit the boat." I tell my father, "I going quit the boat and I going change boat. They (told) me (to) be the skipper."

Well, my father never say nothing. Then when we change the man [change jobs], we used to do at New Year time. So when the New Year came, I tell the skipper over there, I told 'em, "I going change boat." I say, "I going quit this boat." Well, they cannot say nothing. I quit the boat (and) I started to run the other boat [the *Suisan-maru*]. From (then) until the day I quit, I was (a) fisherman, I used to run the boat. At that age I was only about twenty-five. They used to take me cheap, see, they think I was small boy yet.

But my former skipper, after two years he tell me, "Why you never stay with us?"

Well, I cannot say nothing. Then he told me, "If you was with us, I was going make you skipper."

"Well, why you never tell me from the beginning?"

After two years he told me that. Well, I leave 'em as it is. They used to take me cheap, but I used to beat them on the fishing (laughs).

JS: So you (first) started (fishing) with your father, right?

MY: Yeah I started with my . . .

JS: And then you worked one year. It was just your dad and you fishing together that time?

MY: (Yeah.)

JS: That first year when you were with your father, it was on a small boat?

MY: Yeah.

JS: His boat?

MY: Small, his boat, see.

JS: And then how did you folks catch fish?

MY: That, my father was a longline fisherman, what they call bottom fisherman. That's by hook and line. Sometime we used to stay maybe two, three nights fishing. Sometime only daytime. Just go in the morning, come back in the evening.

JS: And did you folks sell the fish then, or did you keep it?

MY: Oh, we sell. Every fish we catch, we sell. We get the market.

JS: What market did you folks sell to?

MY: Oh, that was Hawai'i Fishing Company, [Limited]. That's what the name, I think, was.

JS: Where did you folks fish?

MY: Just around from Hakalau to [Cape] Kumukahi point shoreline. My father and me used to go from Hakalau side sometime. Sometime we go this side, the Kumukahi point. When we go this side to Kumukahi side, mostly we stayed overnight or might be two, three days.

JS: About how much did you folks make? How much money was that?

MY: Oh, I do not know, because (I was a) small kid (so) I don't touch the money.

JS: But it was enough for your family?

MY: Yeah, we were getting along I think.

JS: And your mother still was housewife?

MY: Yeah.

JS: And then you went to that other *aku* boat, right, after? Tell me about a normal day, what would you do on the *aku* boat from the morning to the nighttime?

MY: Well, like *aku* boat, see, we start from Sunday. Sunday evening we go out to this bay to get the bait. We stayed overnight (to) get the bait. Then if we catch enough bait, then we go out (fishing) early in the morning. Say, about now daybreak is about five-thirty, well we get up about four-thirty in the morning. We haul in the net, get the bait, then pull up the anchor, then we start to go out fishing. Then depend how fast we can get the fish. Sometimes we go out there, might be Pepe'ekeo side or this side Kumukahi side. When we get the fish early, we come home early. But if we don't catch the fish, we stay till evening. Depend how much you catch. Sometime you lucky, you come home about ten, eleven [A.M.]. Then you can stay, rest till about two-thirty, afternoon, then you go fishing again for bait, then next day you do the same thing. Sometimes we go around the island to get the fish.

JS: How many people were on the boat?

MY: Oh, mostly about from seven to ten. But mostly about eight. Eight men on the boat.

JS: And you had to cook for everybody?

MY: Yeah, at the beginning. But since---when you come skipper, well you don't do the cooking at all. The cook take care everything.

JS: So you had to fish and cook?

MY: Yeah, we had to fish, too. Yeah, (and) at that time we used to have, the most is about five boats, all *aku* boat.

JS: So one person own the boats or everybody owned it together?

MY: Like my boat, we were shareholder. We hold certain part, certain amount of share. But I make a rule that everybody get one share. See, so when we divide that bonus, well, we divide equally. Not because I'm the skipper I going get more share.

JS: So that was on your boat?

MY: Yeah, that is my boat.

JS: But on the other one when you were first . . .

MY: That I do not know how they run their boat.

JS: And where did they sell their fish?

MY: At the market.

JS: The same market?

MY: Yeah, same market. That small fish like that, well, that I do not know. But like our *aku*, we get contract with [Hawaiian] Tuna Packers, [Limited]. Whatever the market doesn't take, the Tuna Packers take. So that surplus going only for (the) Tuna Packers. But that market sale is up to the market to take care. And then they have peddlers, they buy the fish and they sell outside. They only take certain amount. Whatever fish we bring home, might be 1 percent or something, will be (sold) to that market, to the peddlers. Then the rest all [goes to] Tuna Packers, we get contract with the Tuna Packers. The small fish certain amount, the big fish is certain amount. Might be---we used to get only about, the small fish, 2-1/2 cents a pound. The big one might be about seven cents [a pound]. So if possible we like (to) catch the big one.

JS: And did you folks take home any fish?

MY: Well, we take home for home use.

JS: And about how much did you folks make? How much money a day?

MY: Well, those days not too much. Might be poor year we make only about less than a thousand [dollars] one year. Then might be, average might be we make about \$1,200-[1],300. But for all the time I been riding on the boat, only one year I make I think close to \$2,000. Well, nowadays one month they make that much (laughs). And you know like our system was, if there's eight man, the skipper is (included). So everybody get even share and then the skipper gets only 5 percent of (the boat share). That's all the skipper get. But the rest of the money, it's all divided equally [whether you're] the skipper or the crew.

JS: That was on your boat or the other boat?

MY: That is all [our boats]. Every boat. That's why whatever catch you make you get even share with the captain. Although the captain, he get the boat share, they take away the boat share. Of that he get 5 percent more.

JS: And that's after you sell the fish?

MY: Yeah.

JS: That's the money, yeah?

MY: Every week we get the money. As we come home, that market, they all prepared for us so we get the money. That week's catch. At that time we make only about might be average thirty dollar, forty dollar a week (laughs).

JS: And then that money, what did you do with the money?

MY: Oh, when I come home, well, give it to the wife. She take care (of) the house.

JS: So you were married already?

MY: Yeah, I was married to her [Fumiyo Yamada]. That's why whatever pay I get, I give it to her and then she take care of everything. I (do not) tell her to do this, do that, go buy that, no.

It's up to her.

JS: So when were you married? What year was that?

MY: April 4, 19(37).

JS: So by 193[7] you already---you were still on the *aku* boat or. . . .

MY: Yeah, I was running the *aku* boat.

JS: You were the skipper?

MY: Yeah.

JS: Your father was still fishing on his own?

MY: Yeah, on his own. He used to go out by himself.

JS: Okay, I'm gonna change the tape.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

JS: Okay, we were talking about when you were a fisherman. So you became skipper of your friend's boat after you were twenty-five [years old]?

MY: Yeah, at the beginning (it) was my friend's boat. I think---I don't know how long, but (I worked for them for about) two, three years. After that they (made) another boat [the *Bonito*], (and) then I was (a) shareholder on that boat.

JS: So how did your friend get the money to build the boat?

MY: Oh, that time. . . . Oh for make the boat, we make our boat at Tuna Packers. And then Tuna Packers lend us the money (to) make the boat. So we pay the Tuna Packers certain amount, but we (made) the boat somewhere's around 1940 or something. (When) we make the boat, we borrow from the Tuna Packers, so Tuna Packers make the boat for us, then we pay Tuna Packers. (And we worked on the boat until the war broke out.) But (when) the war broke out, then we (had to leave the boat in the harbor). Just put in the anchor down there and leave 'em. And we cannot go on the boat, (the) army won't let us take care of the boat. [Wartime fishing restrictions prohibited taking the boat out to sea.] So we left 'em there until the war end(ed).

Then Tuna Packers sold the boat to somebody else. But in exchange they gave us another boat. They said, "Forget about whatever [you] owe." The debt, they said forget. So they take the boat and they sold the boat. Then they (gave us) another boat [the *Skipjack*], (and) then we bought the boat with ten men. Every man have equal share on the boat. So if the boat cost

\$20,000, well I gotta pay certain part of that \$20,000.

JS: And that was after the war?

MY: After the war. But between that wartime we had the boat, but we cannot go out. Even if your own boat, you (cannot) go (to) take care.

JS: So before the war though, when you were working with your friend on your friend's boat, yeah, you were skipper. What kinds of things did you do as skipper that was different from first-class fisherman?

MY: Oh, the working condition and this and that? Well, I was a skipper. I tell them what to do, yeah. Before, I take order from them (laughs). That's the difference.

JS: And how many people were on that boat?

MY: Oh, eight including me. Sometime we get eight, sometime we get nine, depend(ing on) that boat. But most of the time eight guys on that boat. That's why on the boat, like us *aku* boat, well I'm the skipper, we get the cook, and we get that bait thrower, (and an engineer). See, they all have their own work to do. The rest [of the crew] is first-class fisherman. But the work, well every man, eight man supposed to do their work, like at nighttime we gotta haul in the net. Well, eight man, eight man, all going. Cook or skipper or anybody gotta go pull in the net (to) get the bait.

JS: And were they about same age as you?

MY: No, the age is different. Some young, some old.

JS: So how did the older fishermen feel about you being skipper even though you so young?

MY: Well, they didn't say anything. They hire(d) me [to be the skipper], so they leave me alone.

JS: And these were all---you knew them already from before? They were friends from before?

MY: Yeah. Like me when I went on the boat as a skipper, I was only twenty-five [years old]. (Most) of them (were) married---well, older than me, way older. Might be thirty, forty [year old] guys, some of them above forty.

JS: Did this boat, how did it compare with the other boat when you were working for the other *aku* boat?

MY: What you mean, compare. . . .

JS: Did you folks catch more fish or same?

MY: Oh, when I went on that boat, I hate to say this, but every year they were on the bottom. Might be we have five boats, but they were at the bottom of the five boats every year. Then when I went on the boat, we came about second or third. So the shareholder on the boat, they were happy that I was on that boat, because I wasn't at the tail end.

JS: That was the boat you were skipper, that boat?

MY: (Yeah), I think when I start to go on the boat [as skipper], I used to catch more (than) [what I caught on] that former boat. That's why that skipper [MY's former boss] told me after two years, "I like you to be our skipper," see, that's what he told me. I used to beat him [in fishing] quite often (laughs).

JS: And then you worked on your friend's boat until the war started, yeah?

MY: Yeah, well, at that time I owned the boat, too. Put certain share, I had (a) share already. That was 1942, already after I got married and everything.

JS: When the war started on December 7, [1941], you said last time that you were at home?

MY: Yeah, that was Sunday, I was at home. I (heard) the noise and (saw) the flash outside, Pepe'ekeo side. From my house I could see only the light. But I don't know where. Might be Pepe'ekeo or someplace around there. Then you hear the radio said the war (had) started and this and that. Well, we cannot go out. And then we cannot go on the boat from that day. On the radio, they said that (in Honolulu) the army had machine gunner at Kewalo Basin. They see the boat coming in, they start shooting. Oh, we was thinking, "What happened anyway?" But lucky nobody got shot over here. But Honolulu, I know one man died from that. And then they said the coast guard telling you to go back [in to shore], and then they would shoot that boat. Why?

JS: So on that day, what else do you remember happened, on the day that the war started? Were you folks planning to go, before the war started, that day you were planning to go fishing though?

MY: Yeah. Because every week we worked till Saturday, then Saturday we come [home] early or afternoon. [Saturday] night we stay home, then Sunday evening we start working. That's our schedule every week. Only moonlight, we get three days off. [Because fishing was generally considered poor during the full moon, they took that time off.] That war (broke) out on Sunday morning, see, (so) we were (still) at home.

JS: So lucky then.

MY: Lucky. (Laughs)

JS: And what did you think when you couldn't go to your boat?

MY: We cannot do nothing, only just look at it. Sometime I go down the beach and I see where my boat is and still there, well, that's all.

JS: So what about that night that the war started, that December 7, do you remember things like the blackout and what happened?

MY: When the war (broke) out, yeah, after that had blackout and this and that. But that day wasn't nothing, we think nothing of it. Saturday we figure that we going certain place to catch (the) fish, we were planning, but since the war (broke) out and that radio said you cannot go, well

we cannot help, only just look from the shoreline (at) your boat.

JS: So do you remember anything that---what kinds of things did you hear about other fishermen who were out fishing that day around Hilo side, around the Big Island?

MY: Oh, like us *aku* boat, well, we go home Saturday evening. [Then the war started on Sunday, and after that], that's why only we just get together and talk, but we cannot get together too many guys, because the army doesn't want that. Only certain amount of person can talk [i.e., congregate together]. But I think we stayed home less than one month. Then they said we gotta work, we gotta work for the army, you cannot stay loafing around. So we start working and they hire us as net maker. So we start to make net. And then they hire(d) us (for) only fifty cents an hour. They hire(d) women (for) sixty cents an hour, how come? And then (the) classification (that) they give us is unskilled labor. (From when) I start work and then until I quit, still unskilled labor. They (didn't) promote us (laughs).

First we made net, you know those camouflage net, they weave burlap and this and that. They used to cut out that thing and then they put that burlap here and there, weave (it) together. That's what we were making. First we start(ed) making the net, then I think had enough net. Then we start to dye that thing in paint. Paint, I think we (had a) bathtub, they put paint in there (and) we dump in the net and then dry that thing. That's what we were doing. Then that was enough I think, net we made.

Then they put us on that labor side. At the beginning we went to help unload lumber, this and that from the train. Sometimes they unload those timber and then we help them to make lumber out of that timber. Then they bring us down Waiākea again, they have those guys stack the lumber up. You know, they used to bring lumber on that train. Before they used to run train. They unload that lumber and we stack out on that yard. Then the army, they come pick up the lumber, we load and unload. And not only lumber, cement and everything. Oh, that cement job I never like though. Yeah, you [pick up] one cement [bag], you drop 'em down, you see the dust coming out. That's why after that, only your eyes and your mouth [showing], the rest is all covered with cement from the head to the toe.

We used to work warehouse, (too). Sometimes we load lumber over here on the truck. Then we used to go Waimea, we used to unload that thing and come back. And then we still load big dumper truck [with] those gravel, stone, with shovel. You can load one big truck about eight cubic or ten cubic yards—two guys, it takes about one hour for load that. Not with crane, hand power with shovel (laughs). That was hard work though. We were unloading lumber and then we unload steel. They make concrete form and they put that steel wire in there. Steel iron. That's when I got this.

JS: Oh, scar.

MY: On my chin, it's still over here. They were unloading the thing [bundles of steel cables] with the crane. Then I catch that [crane] hook on that wire (to lift the steel out), and I just happened to be there, this thing [the binding] (broke and) then hit me over here, fly me from that train to the ground. [MY stood on the train and attached the crane hook to the cables to be lifted out.] That's when I (got) cut over here. When I put that stick under, the thing (broke), it hit the lumber, then with that lumber he catch me, fly me outside.

Then the army take me to army hospital, they patch me up. Two days I rested. The third day (laughs), the army man came down, "Eh, you come (to) work." Yeah, he tell me come (to) work. Well, (cannot) help, I gotta go work (laughs).

JS: How much did you folks get paid?

MY: Oh, fifty cents an hour.

JS: Even to load the lumber and unload lumber?

MY: Yeah, everything only fifty cents. And then on top that we gotta buy savings bond.

JS: So how much did you have to buy the savings bond?

MY: Oh, it take quite a while. You put in only certain amount because you need the money for your home. You gotta eat and support your family. But still we used to put certain amount of money, then we used to save savings bond. I (have) about twelve I think. You cannot buy with one paycheck one bond like that. You gotta put only about might be four or five dollar one payday.

JS: And that was because the army said you had to, or you folks decided on your own?

MY: Oh, that they tell you to buy. Well, (cannot) help, you gotta buy.

JS: Unskilled labor they called you folks?

MY: Yeah.

JS: Was it mostly fishermen? Or what kind of people were working?

MY: Oh, all kind of people. Not only fisherman, might be land guys, this and that. But like us fisherman, all unskilled labor. The rest I don't know what classification they had.

JS: But they worked with---same as you?

MY: Yeah, we were working same.

JS: And what kind of nationality were they?

MY: Nationality? Oh, they were all kind of nationality. They were Hawaiian. Might be some other nationality, but looks like at that time, those guys, they get better pay than us because they not like us unskilled labor. But I never did ask what kind [of] classification they have. You know, when we were all making net like that, our foreman, he used to only catch lobster with that lobster trap. We used to take him cheap. But when the war broke out he was our foreman.

JS: And he was Japanese, too?

MY: No, he wasn't. He was part-German I think. Reinhardt we used to call 'em.

JS: So the unskilled labor, were they all Japanese?

MY: Oh, yeah. Other nationality, I don't know, I never ask their classification. (Some Japanese did become foremen), but like us fisherman, Japanese fisherman, Japanese but we second generation, all unskilled labor.

JS: And did you have to wear badges?

MY: No, no badge. Only card, that's all.

JS: What did the card say?

MY: I don't know what we used to call. I used to have (it) till lately, see. But I don't know where I put the card I had.

JS: And what was it for, the card?

MY: Oh, when they question you, you show the card. Might be you might say identification card.

JS: Did everybody have the card or just . . .

MY: That I don't know, but like us Japanese fisherman, well, we used to have. [MY is referring to the identification cards which every civilian in Hawai'i over the age of six was required to carry.]

JS: And what about your father? Was he. . . .

MY: Oh, my father was gone already. He died. When the war (broke) out my father wasn't. . . . But my mother, she died during the war. Might be at the ending part of the war. She died in 1944.

JS: So during the war then, how was she taken care of?

MY: Oh, she was with us.

JS: She was living with you?

MY: Yeah.

JS: And what about your other brothers and sister? Where were they?

MY: At that time my brothers and sister all (in) Honolulu. Only me over here.

JS: How did they manage during the war?

MY: I think they manage pretty good though. During the war I think my third brother, yeah, he was working for the army office. That's why they question me about my brother, what he (had) done before the war, this and that. They question me I think two time or three time. FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] call me at their office and then they question what my

brother was doing before. That's why I think he was working for the army in the office. Because he was working someplace in Ka'ū [on the Big Island], (before the war) see, he was working over there. And then this and that, he [the investigator] question me.

JS: What about your other brothers and sister?

MY: The other brothers and sister, I do not know, but they were in Honolulu.

JS: So that one brother was working for the army, but not, he wasn't soldier?

MY: No, not soldier but in the office, Honolulu office.

JS: So then, you know you had to---you couldn't fish anymore . . .

MY: No.

JS: . . . and had to do these hard jobs now. How did you folks manage, because the money you got was so little bit now compared to when you were fishing?

MY: I think we used to make more money [fishing] than working on top (the) land. Because they only pay us fifty cents an hour. See, I work eight hours, although we work eight hours, only fifty cents [an hour]. How much? Only four dollar one day.

JS: So how did you folks manage with so little pay?

MY: Well, cannot help, you gotta (laughs).

JS: How did you folks buy food?

MY: It's up to her [MY's wife], not me (laughs).

JS: Did you folks have to use rationing? Did Hilo have rationing? Like only can buy so much, certain amount?

MY: No, I think you can buy any amount, but you have to go and buy and then pay, that's all. They (don't) limit us. [Rationing on the Big Island lasted only for a few days at the start of the war.]

JS: Were there other regulations or things that the army said you couldn't do now because of the war and being Japanese? Like they said you folks couldn't go fishing. Was there other things they said you couldn't do?

MY: No, only fishing I think. I think only was that we cannot go fishing with the boat. Although we can fish from the land [shoreline fishing]. That is okay, but cannot go on the boat and go fishing.

JS: How did you feel about that? How the army treated you?

MY: Well, I don't feel nothing at all. Might be right or wrong, I don't know. Because we can do

anything we like, but as long as we (don't) go on the boat. (The army didn't treat us badly, because we followed the rules.)

JS: What about the other people like the Hawaiians and other nationalities? How did you folks get along after the war started?

MY: Same. We don't feel no difference.

JS: They didn't treat you folks different then?

MY: No. I don't think so though.

JS: What about other things in the Japanese community? Were the schools, Japanese[-language] schools still running? Do you know about those things?

MY: No. [Japanese-language schools throughout Hawai'i were closed and did not reopen until after the war.]

JS: Okay, what about other things in the fishing business like the supermarket and the peddlers? How did the war change what they were doing?

MY: Oh, you mean the business?

JS: Yeah.

MY: What you call, fishing business. There's no fishing at that time because nobody will be fishing [due to all the fishing restrictions].

JS: So did a lot of businesses close?

MY: Oh, yes. The market doesn't work at all because no fish at all. Nobody go fishing. Although we used to go (shoreline fishing) with pole. As long as we (don't) go on the boat (it's okay). Shoreline fishing we do, like pole fishing or net fishing. But nighttime we cannot go fishing. Nighttime curfew was I think about eight o'clock. You cannot go out from the house even. But shoreline fishing, like pole fishing, might be net fishing, well, they allow (it), they (don't) stop (you).

JS: So did you still do that kind of fishing then?

MY: We used to, yeah, for pleasure. Might be [for] home use, we used to go. I used to go fishing, might be crabbing. From shoreline you throw net, catch crab. Get fish, well, yeah. We used to go around Keaukaha side, catch fish.

JS: And you said that you folks had curfew, yeah?

MY: Yeah, curfew from eight [P.M.] you cannot go out from the house.

JS: So did you have to do blackout, too?

MY: Yeah, blackout, too. You know when my mother died, had blackout. My mother died (in) 1944. Morning time she died, but evening time I had the light (on). People come (to) visit, talk this and that. And the policeman come, "Eh, how come you get your light on?"

I said, "Sorry, but my mother passed away."

"Oh, oh, in that case okay." He said, "That's okay."

Because the war was more on the Allied (side) winning the war and the Japanese was going down. So I think they let us [leave the light on]. They were good enough, the policeman say, "Yeah, if your mother died, well, cannot help. It's okay."

JS: And did you folks have to build air raid shelter, too?

MY: Air raid shelter, yeah, they used to (talk about it), but we never (had one). When that [air raid] siren ring we get no place to go. Used to get, yeah, air raid (practice)---they used to have air raid shelter. And then that block warden or something like that, they used to have. When curfew time they supposed to go around and stop the people from putting on the light.

JS: What about gas mask?

MY: Gas mask, they were talking about gas mask, but we never had (any). They were saying and they used to demonstrate, but we never have gas mask.

JS: And at that time then, during the war, was your wife working?

MY: No, my wife wasn't working.

JS: So then during the war it was only the fifty cents an hour?

MY: Yeah (laughs). Cannot help, eh.

JS: What about the draft? Were you---was there any kind of drafting into the army or anything?

MY: No, they never ask me. I think I was too old, passed the age I think.

JS: Did you know some people who went into the . . .

MY: No, I do not know.

JS: So how did you feel about, you know, you're a Japanese American, but how did you feel about the war against Japan?

MY: I don't feel nothing at all. And they treat me just the same, so I never feel nothing at all. Only that part that I cannot go fishing, that part yeah, I do feel (laughs). . . . But [other than] that, no, I get no feeling.

JS: Did the other people, other nationalities, could they still go fishing?

MY: No, they never go fishing. [Ocean fishing was restricted for most of the war.]

JS: What did you think, though, did you think you were more Japanese side or for the American side or did it matter?

MY: No, I never feel. . . . I never take side, any side. That part, no, I (had) no ill feeling against Japan or American or whatever.

JS: What about the other people? The other people in the Japanese community, the other Japanese neighbors, how did they feel about the war?

MY: I don't know, *no*. Never ask or. . . .

JS: Were there things like Japanese[-language] newspapers and radio that you folks had?

MY: Japanese newspaper? No, I don't know.

JS: Not over here?

MY: No. [Japanese-language newspapers and foreign language broadcasts were suspended during the war.]

JS: Okay, you want to take a short break?

MY: Yeah.

END OF SIDE TWO

TAPE NO. 22-83-1-93; SIDE ONE

JS: This is a continuation of an interview with Mr. Mitsuru Yamada.

Okay, Mr. Yamada we were talking about World War II, and I was wondering, you folks living in Hilo, how much did you know about what was happening on the other islands like on O'ahu?

MY: No.

JS: No news?

MY: No, I don't know.

JS: Did you hear anything about how things were though, on the other islands?

MY: No.

JS: So just mostly only Hilo things?

MY: Yeah.

JS: How much did you know about the war and how things were going? Who was winning and things like that?

MY: Oh, that only you know whatever you hear on the radio and this and that. Newspaper. (Other than) that, we do not know.

JS: How did you feel about the war and what was happening?

MY: Oh, I don't feel nothing at all. Get war or not. (The) only thing we feel is that we cannot go fishing, that's all.

JS: So when were you able to go back to [deep-sea] fishing?

MY: Yeah, as soon as they say, yeah we can go back to fishing, well, we did go back to fishing.

JS: That was in 1945, right after the war ended?

MY: Yeah, after the war. [The ban on fishing by boat had been lifted in July 1945. However, until after the war, certain restrictions remained which prohibited those of Japanese ancestry from captaining the crafts.]

JS: So you were telling me about the [Hawaiian] Tuna Packers, [Limited] and they—you folks got a different boat, right?

MY: Yeah.

JS: So how did that happen? Can you explain a little bit more about why that happened?

MY: We had our boat [the *Bonito*], that boat was new. But we tied up the boat during the war without taking care of the boat out there. But still we (wanted) to (keep) that boat because it's new. But no, the Tuna Packers, they said they sold the boat to some other party and then they (were) willing to give us another boat. And then whatever we owe to the Tuna Packers, they said forget about it and you buy this new boat. Then we did buy the new boat, but not with the same shareholders because some of them were not [American] citizens. So we form a new group and then we bought the boat [the *Skipjack*]. And each man pay whatever share there is. We pay equally and I think we paid \$1,000 each. One share \$1,000. And every person get one share. We had ten men on the boat, so we took out \$1,000 each to make it \$10,000. And the rest [of the balance] we owe to the Packers. Then as we work, we paid off gradually. Whatever we make, well, we pay. Then I think within one year we did pay up that note.

JS: So the boat was [over] \$10,000, then?

MY: Yeah, the boat was for us after that. And then we stayed together for not too long, might be two, three years. I don't know exactly how many years, but then they (started) to make another boat, that other party. But we cannot help. We cannot do nothing. So they make their own boat and they quit our boat. Then we were left behind, six men I think. Six or seven men (were) left behind. So we bought their share and put it all together with our. . . . So they

make their own boat and we run our own boat. And until my last day, I work(ed) on that same boat.

JS: So what company was this?

MY: The name, it say *Skipjack*. And then they make their boat and they name it *Corsair*. I have a picture of the boat.

JS: And you said that you folks had to form a new group 'cause some of the other people weren't citizens?

MY: Yeah, we form a new group. Because when we made that other boat, that new boat [the *Bonito*], well, we had noncitizens as shareholder. In fact, they were that former owner [of the *Suisan-maru*] and then they sold their boat. In other words, when we make the new boat, they put in that old boat share in there. And then they're the main shareholder. And like us, and then couple of other boys, then we were new shareholder [of the *Bonito*]. But that old former shareholder, we cannot get together [to own the new boat, the *Skipjack*] because they're noncitizens. So, we cannot help but exclude those guys. That's what happened. In other words, I like that old shareholder to be together [with us as owners], see, they were good men. But since they're noncitizen, well, we cannot help it.

JS: So the government didn't let them be fishermen, then?

MY: Yeah, they cannot be fishermen [on the boats]. And after a while they allow noncitizens to become fishermen. But at that time, at that beginning, they were not allowed to be fishermen. [Noncitizens could not own or operate the boats, but under certain restrictions and with permits, citizen fishermen could employ noncitizens as fishermen.]

JS: And you were still skipper then, of this new boat?

MY: Yeah.

JS: So when you folks started fishing again after the war, how was the fishing?

MY: Oh, fishing was the same, but we as a shareholder, well, we feel better. Whatever we make, at the end of the year we get a certain bonus come with the share.

JS: And the money was better, too, right? More money from fishing?

MY: Money, not too much difference, *no*. We used to make about \$1,300-[1],400, \$[1],500 one year. One year, not one month you know.

(Laughter)

MY: But they---as a whole that was pretty good. And that time I used to think, "Eh, if I have about \$30,000, I think I can retire, *no*." Yeah, but today \$30,000 is nothing. But then everything was cheap. You can get along with that, whatever money we used to make. And that store around there used to be good. When we don't catch fish during the winter months, well that's off-season. Well, we get store balance pile up, but they don't force us to pay.

Then the season come, we pay up our debt and go out [to fish]. We used to get along okay with that much money we used to make (laughs).

JS: So did the stores that were closed during the war, did the same stores open again after the war? The fishing stores, the market?

MY: Yeah, that stores were open during the wartime, too. They didn't stop from working. They run their own store, but the fishermen, yeah, we cannot go fishing, that's all.

JS: So what about the stores that only sold fish?

MY: Oh, fish market was all closed.

JS: Yeah. So did any of those open up again?

MY: Yeah, they cannot run, no more fish. But after the war when we started to go fishing, yeah, they open. We used to have two fish markets. One closed down, only one stayed behind. Before was Hawai'i [Fishing Company, Limited] fish market. That close(d during the war). And only Suisan [Kabushiki Kaisha, Limited] fish market [now Suisan Company Limited] is still running (today).

JS: What about the---before had fish peddlers, right?

MY: Yeah. That's still they have, fish peddlers. But not like before, no.

JS: What about the price of the fish?

MY: The price of the fish today is sky high. Our time (after the war) you must think, our *aku* we sell [to the markets for] twenty cents a pound. That's that big *aku* we used to catch. It's twenty cents a pound. We set the (price), see. No high, no low. Twenty cents. But today you try buy one big *aku*, you cannot get for two, three dollar a pound.

JS: What about the price before and after the war? Right before and after the war?

MY: Oh, right after the war. Yes, I think so, about the same. Only might be little bit higher. But gradually the price start to come up.

JS: What other kinds of changes did you notice between fishing before and then later on fishing?

MY: Well, when we were fishing we have our *aku* boat. We have flagline boat and then we used to have bottom line fishing. But today, no more. No more *aku* boat, no more longline fishing. Bottom fishing only, they go out with that fiberglass boat. Not much. I (don't) blame that the price will go up. There's not fish enough on the market. Even *aku* itself, we used to have five boat at the beginning, but gradually we (had) only two. The two *aku* boat when they come home with the fish, he flood the market. But today, you see only few fish on the market. I don't blame the price will go up.

You know when I was fishing, only once, although I caught a lot of swordfish, but one swordfish (was) extra large, yeah. You know like us eight man, we just put in the boat, we

cannot move the fish already. We cannot move front or back or side or anything. And then when we came home, I put the fish on the boat and I sold the fish on the boat because we cannot move that fish, so big. And then after I sold the fish, they cut the fish in four parts. The head they take it off and the tail they took it off. And then they cut the body in four pieces. And two men, big men, get hard time to carry that fish. I think that fish must have been more than 1,500 pound. One swordfish. Because swordfish, I caught plenty and about 1,000-pound kind I caught, too. And I used to compare the fish, you know, when I take the picture. Thousand-pound fish and the fish what I (caught), you compare, looks like father and son. No, man and children. Yeah, you put that picture together.

But I lost the picture of that big fish. During the war, well I cannot keep anything in that home, whatever, so I sent that picture on the wall to my father-in-law house. And then I don't know what they (did with it). I never received after that. But I like(d) the fish picture because that's the biggest fish I (caught). I think had more than 1,500 pounds, might be close to 2,000 pounds that one fish. Where eight men (can hardly) put that fish on the boat. We cannot move (the fish). And the fish, the tail was on the stern of the boat, and the nose was inside the engine room, engine compartment. That's why it took the whole length of the boat where we work. So big. You know one man was about six feet tall I think, might be little bit over. He can just step it over. He can make 'em. And one side was on that cover and was kind of high, and then he just make 'em to step over the fish. That's (how) the man, he measured, see. When the fish come in, he measured by that length. When he *matageru* you might say, *no*.

JS: You know, you said you sent the picture to your father-in-law's house. You sent other things, too, during the war? Other pictures and things?

MY: Yeah, I used to have picture and this and that. I put 'em away to my father-in-law's place. But certain pictures, yeah, we did receive, but only that fish picture I miss 'em.

JS: Why did you send the pictures over there?

MY: Well, they said they going come search during the wartime. Whatever you keep, well, if you keep certain stuff you not supposed to keep, they said they might put you in jail or this and that. So I send everything. Good or bad, well, I don't know which is which, so I send up everything, that picture.

JS: And they were in Japan?

MY: No. They were living way up Onomea.

JS: So what kinds of things did you send?

MY: Oh, well what kinds of things, well, any kind [of] picture we used to have. They might not prosecute you, but good or bad, well I just send 'em up that's all. Might be my family picture, my father's side picture, this and that. My mother's side picture. So the whole lot I send 'em up.

JS: Were they Japanese type of things? Like Japanese kind of pictures?

MY: Yeah.

JS: And were you folks---did they ever come and search over here?

MY: No.

JS: So you didn't feel too threatened by the military people then?

MY: No.

JS: You weren't worried about it?

MY: Only one time they call(ed) me was, they questioned about my brother. The FBI did call me and they questioned me about my brother, what he was doing on this island [before the war]. That's all. Other than that, no trouble.

JS: So the war for you wasn't too bad except for you couldn't fish?

MY: Yeah. But those days when the FBI call you, you feel kind of funny (laughs). And then when (they) question---one guy question you and one guy was on the side just only listening.

JS: Okay, and then you were fishing from after the war until you retired? Why did you decide to retire from fishing?

MY: Too old already. Become sixty, sixty-one [years old].

JS: So what happened to the boat, then?

MY: Oh, the boat, after a while because I quit, they just tie 'em up. Then after a while we sold the boat.

JS: So your whole crew quit?

MY: Yeah, they quit. They never go back fishing, they all got land job. And then the way I (heard), afterwards we sold the boat. Then about year, year and a half, the guy who bought the boat, from O'ahu to Kaua'i they were running the boat over there and they sunk the boat. I don't know how come. Maybe they never take care of the boat. They said the boat (sank). That's what I heard, the last of it. Yeah, we bought the boat, then when we sell the boat we sold 'em cheap. Yeah.

JS: And so, have you gone fishing though, after you retired?

MY: No, never go out. Maybe only shoreline fishing. And so on (laughs). . . .

JS: Okay, well, thank you for. . . .

MY: I hope I have helped in any way.

END OF INTERVIEW

AN ERA OF CHANGE

Oral Histories of Civilians in World War II Hawai'i

Volume I

**Center for Oral History
Social Science Research Institute
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa**

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